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ABSTRACT

In most interpersonal communication courses, educators teach their students about the actions competent communicators will take to make a relationship more satisfying for both parties. What happens, however, when educators consider maintenance behaviors in the context of a relationship that is destructive, a system that is not only dysfunctional, but is abusive? It might be expected that the behaviors that maintain a healthy relationship would also maintain a sick one. An even deeper question might be whether or not relationship maintenance behaviors that function to nurture a healthy relationship also function to nurture--to fuel--the dysfunction in an abusive system. If so, then the very behaviors educators teach as important skills to know and to enact as a competent communicator may function to increasingly entrap, enmesh, and contribute to a system that is destructive to that communicator. This paper briefly reviews some of the research on relational maintenance behaviors, concluding that, on the basis of the review, it appears that enacting relationship maintenance behaviors are functional if a person wants to preserve a relationship, repair a relationship, or help a relationship become more satisfying for both partners. The paper then reviews characteristics of an abusive relational system. Finally, it looks at how relational maintenance behaviors may function within the context of that system. (Contains 12 references and 2 tables.) (NKA)

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RUNNINGHEAD: Maintaining an Abusive Relationship: What Do Relational Maintenance Behaviors Really Mean?

Maintaining an Abusive Relationship:

What Do Relational Maintenance Behaviors Really Mean?

ED 473 481

By

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Maintaining an Abusive Relationship: What Do Relational Maintenance Behaviors Really Mean?

Yesterday I was sitting in the waiting room at the car dealership while waiting for the oil in my car to be changed, and I picked up a magazine that contained one of those "how to keep your marriage happy" articles. The advice was pretty standard (directed to wives): pay attention to your husband's emotional state, listen to him, show empathy, accommodate when you can, affirm him by acknowledging his perspectives and opinions, use language that, in our vernacular, is confirming rather than disconfirming. The advice was entirely consistent with the kinds of things we teach in most interpersonal communication courses, and entirely consistent with what many texts point to as the actions competent communicators will take in order to make a relationship more satisfying for both parties. I don't know about you, but I've read many articles in lay publications like this one. I have also taught these concepts, and I have emphasized the importance of enacting these types of behaviors for sustaining a healthy relationship.

What happens, however, when we consider maintenance behaviors in the context of a relationship that is destructive, a system that is not only dysfunctional, but is abusive? One would expect that the behaviors that maintain a healthy relationship would also maintain a sick one. I believe there is an even deeper question, however: might relationship maintenance behaviors that function to nurture a healthy relationship also function to nurture—to fuel—the dysfunction in an abusive system? If so, then the very behaviors we teach as important skills to know and to enact as a competent communicator may function to increasingly entrap, enmesh, and contribute to a system that is destructive to that communicator.

First I will do a quick review of some of the research on relational maintenance behaviors. Then I will review characteristics of an abusive relational system. Finally, I will look at how relational maintenance behaviors may function within the context of that system.

A Brief Review: Relationship Maintenance

There are recommendations and lists of behaviors that researchers have found to be associated with relationships that individuals identify as satisfying, and that they intent to continue. These are often identified as skills that people need to know *how* to enact and that they need *to* enact in order to maintain satisfaction in a relationship. Knapp & Vangelisti (1996) for example state:

> The ability to identify which subset of behaviors act in a relationship-maintaining way is, of course, part of the skill relationship caretakers must develop. Failure to maintain (appropriately care for) certain key communicative aspects of a relationship (e.g., conflict and affection) on a

> regular schedule may mean that eventually there will be need for repair and rejuvenation. (p. 232)

Most of our texts and discussions of relationship maintenance seem to be similarly grounded: maintaining a relationship is a good thing to do, and a competent communicator not only has the skills to do so but will enact them. One should practice maintenance behaviors when in a long-term relationship to enhance the health of the relationship and to ensure relational satisfaction of the partners. According to Dindia (1994), relational maintenance researchers have typically been concerned with strategies people use to keep a relationship "at an advanced level of intimacy, thus preventing it from de-escalating and terminating" (p. 97).

Relationship maintenance behaviors have been associated with the amount of rewards in the relationship, as well as the sense of equity in a relationship (Canary, Cody & Manusov, 2000, p. 232). Factors associated with maintaining relationships include such things as keeping the number of favors and emotional support levels balanced (Dindia, p. 98). Affinity seeking or affinity maintenance strategies have also been identified, including altruism, honesty, physical affection, sensitivity, eliciting other's disclosures, equality, inclusion of other, conceding control, optimism, listening, self-concept confirmation, supportiveness, among others (see Dindia, p. 98; Canary, Cody & Manusov, p. 235-236). The five strategies identified by Stafford & Canary (1991) in their review of the literature on relationship maintenance (positivity, openness, assurances, social networks, and sharing tasks) appear in most discussions of relationship maintenance. It is generally accepted that, with some limitations, enacting these behaviors will be helpful to a relationship, whether in sustaining or repairing that relationship if it is disrupted.

In order to maintain a relationship individuals must also deal with relational dialectics (Baxter, 1994). In particular, individuals must be able to respond to dialectical tensions so that they do not tear the relationship apart. Baxter (1990) identifies four basic ways that couples respond to dialectics: Through selection, where they satisfy one tension and ignore the other; through separation, where they assign one need or the other to a specific sphere or issue or time (one might be very open about politics but not about money); neutralization, where the individuals compromise, never fully meeting one need or the other; and reframing, where the individual transforms the dialectic so it is not seen as in opposition (e.g., one argues that preserving autonomy is essential to enriching the connection).

People maintain their long-term relationships psychologically as well. Rusbult, Drigotas, and Verrete (1994) discuss how individuals remain in relationships for a number of reasons, including through comparing their current situation with alternatives. Because individuals believe their current relationship is superior over others, or by derogating potential alternative relational partners, individuals increase their own sense of commitment and investment in the relationship. Furthermore, by showing their commitment, they solidify the extent of their commitment to their partner and potentially engage the norm of reciprocity.

> In a general sense, highly committed individuals have a vested interest in the well-being of their partners as well as in the future of their relationships, and should accordingly act to protect their investments. Second, for highly committed partners, engaging in prorelationship behaviors on earlier occasions may yield direct benefits for the individual on later occasions. Given the strength and adaptive utility of reciprocity norms, earlier cooperative acts are likely to yield later reciprocal cooperation from one's partner. . . . Third, by engaging in personally costly, prorelationship behaviors, a committed individual may communicate to the partner his or her cooperative, long-term orientation. When people behave in ways that are inconsistent with their immediate self-interest (e.g., sacrificing for the good of the relationship) they provide their partners with relatively unambiguous evidence of their feelings, attitudes, and intentions. (p. 123-124)

These scholars go on to argue that "the hallmark of effective couple functioning is (1) a strong commitment that is (2) experience equally by the partners" They note that high levels of sacrifice and a willingness to accommodate "when their partners behave poorly" are crucial features in relationships that endure. "Thus, in general, it appears that relationship health is promoted by both strong commitment and by greater tendencies toward the relationship maintenance mechanisms discussed herein" (i.e., a willingness to sacrifice and to accommodate).

> It is important to demonstrate that strong commitment to a relationship serves a positive function in that relationship; that is, feelings of commitment not only help keep a couple together, but also help keep a couple well adjusted. (p. 133)

On the basis of this review, it appears that enacting relationship maintenance behaviors are functional if one wants to preserve a relationship, repair a relationship, or help a relationship become more satisfying for both partners.

A Brief Look at Emotionally and Psychologically Abusive Communication Systems

The communication patterns within an abusive system are central to defining it. While my focus here is on emotional and psychological abuse, it is important to realize that even in relationships where there is physical abuse, the emotional and psychological abuse almost always presages the physical abuse. Dutton points out that "the abiding elements [of abuse] (anger, jealousy, blaming, recurring moods, and trauma symptoms) are generally present in all cyclical abusers. So too are the forms of abusiveness. The two most frequent are emotional abuse and domination/control" (Dutton, 1995, p. 140). He goes on to note that while less common, physical battering and sexual assault are both still accompanied by emotional abuse and domination/control.

Abuse takes several forms, but the behaviors in Table 1 are typically identified as characteristic of an abusive system.

Table 1: Types of emotional/psychological abuse

(Compiled based on Beverly Engel (1990), Patricia Evans (1996), and Linda Marshall, (1994), and the MANALIVE list of controlling behaviors, reported in Evans, (1996).

- Domination: insistence upon getting his/her own way in all things. Rage and threats are used as tools to enforce domination. Threats need not be physical.
- Forms of domination include: controlling time; controlling space; controlling material resources
- Abusive expectations: unreasonable demands, often shown in a constant need for undivided attention, demands for frequent sex, or requiring other to spend all ones free time in the way s/he wants. Whatever one has done is never enough; the bar will always be raised, resulting in constant criticism. Any acknowledgement of having done what was desired is accompanied by a criticism justifying the additional expectation.
- Emotional blackmail: setting up a frame that leads to the conclusion that one is not compassionate enough (or should be shamed or guilty).
- Unpredictable responses: drastic mood swings, emotional outbursts for no identifiable reason.
- Constant criticism
- Character assassination: ridiculing, gossiping about one's failures to others, telling lies about other, humiliating or making fun of other in front of third parties, discounting one's achievements
- Gaslighting: denying one's reality, undermining and devaluing one's perceptions, denial that things were said or done, calling concerns "overreacting" or "self-serving"
- Constant chaos and conflict: continual upheaval and discord. Initiating arguments, creating conflict
- Sexual abuse: unwelcome sexual advances, pressure to be sexual against one's will, inappropriate sexual remarks, making fun of sexual concerns
- Verbal and nonverbal behaviors such as
    - Sulking
    - Refusing to talk
    - Strutting/posturing/stomping
    - hitting something/kicking something/breaking something
    - driving recklessly
    - put downs
    - countering
    - humiliating with jokes
    - blaming
    - accusing
    - judging
    - criticizing
    - trivializing
    - undermining
    - threatening
    - name calling
    - ordering/demanding
    - denial
    - shifting responsibility
    - denigration
    - abusive anger
- Compulsion to violate boundaries
- Creation of double binds

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Patricia Evans argues that an abusive system is best understood as one where the partners are functioning with two very different frameworks for understanding the nature of the relationship and the nature of power. Furthermore, they are not aware of functioning from these two different frameworks. The abuser understands power as something that is affirmed and sustained by exerting power over others. The partner, however, approaches the relationship as one of mutuality, where the relationship is defined through co-creation. Personal power in this perspective is sustained through mutual support, cooperation, and participation with an other. Patricia Evans: "[T]he verbal abuser and the partner seemed to be living in two different realities. The abuser's orientation was toward control and dominance. The partner's orientation was toward mutuality and co-creation." (1996, p. 31). She calls these two perspectives "*Reality I*" and "*Reality II*" (see Table 2).

Table 2: Perspectives on power in abusive relationships

Based on descriptions by Patricia Evans (1996). *The Verbally Abusive Relationship: how to recognize it and how to respond.* Holbrook, MA: Adams Media.

Reality I: *Personal power is affirmed and sustained by exerting power over others*	***Reality II:*** *Personal power is affirmed and sustained by enacting power with others*
➢ A relationship is defined by who controls it. ➢ Value is on having control and dominance ➢ One sustains power by undermining and discounting others' perceptions ➢ The sense of power is maintained only as long as one has an "other" to have power over ➢ Dominating and controlling others is a way to avoid feeling powerless (because there is no internal sense of personal power) ➢ Vulnerability will destroy power ➢ The goal is to "win"	➢ A relationship is defined through mutuality and co-creation ➢ Value is on connection to one's own feelings ➢ Value in on connection to others' feelings (empathy) ➢ Personal power increased with cooperation and participation with another person ➢ A good relationship is by definition one where there is mutual support, empathy, and trust
Characteristics of communication	Characteristics of communication
Inequality Competition Manipulation Hostility Control Negation	Equality Partnership Mutuality Goodwill Intimacy Validation

Evans argues that functioning in *Reality II* (from the perspective of mutuality and co-creation) while your partner is functioning within *Reality I* (a system based upon maintaining dominance) puts one at risk. Furthermore, until one realizes that there are

different frameworks functioning (systems of meaning, or logics-in-use), it is impossible to understand what is happening. All predictions about the consequences of communication behaviors are completely unreliable because the responses one can expect within *Reality II* are utterly unpredictable when interacting with a partner functioning in *Reality I.* Responses are only predictable in their unpredictability.

It is also important to consider the characteristics of individuals who abuse, because it clarifies the intractability of this system of meaning. Dutton (1995) identifies a connection between those who abuse and the psychological diagnostic category of borderline personality disorder. He states that this clinical category was developed:

> for people who are neither psychotic nor neurotic. Indeed, the term originally referred to people who existed on the border between these two disorders. Borderlines do not confuse themselves with another person, the way that psychotic people might, but they have a split in their self-perceptions. (p. 141)

Dutton connects this split to the "Dr. Jekyll/Mr. Hyde" descriptions given by partners of those who are cyclical abusers.[1]

DSM-IV Diagnostic and Statistical Manual identifies diagnostic categories for BPD, four of which are especially relevant to this confusion-generating communication system. An individual with BPD experiences:

1. recurring periods of dejection and apathy interspersed with spells of anger, anxiety, or euphoria
2. repetitive self-destructive thoughts, including self-derogation (which functions to redeem himself)
3. a preoccupation with securing affection and maintaining emotional support; intense reactions to separation, fear of isolation and loss
4. conflicting emotions toward others, notably, love, rage, and guilt. (p. 144).

Characteristics of persons with borderline personality disorder include : "a proclivity for intense, unstable interpersonal relationships characterized by intermittent undermining of the significant other, manipulation, and masked dependency; an unstable sense of self with intolerance of being alone and abandonment anxiety; and intense anger, demandingness, and impulsivity." (p. 142). An individual with these characteristics "literally needs the intimate other to help sustain his sense of self-integrity." When abusers are unable to maintain their sense of identity, their fear and sense of unreality seek explanation. Their partners become the focus of this attempt to find explanations for their own inability to maintain sense of self.

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[1] Both Dutton and Evans use male pronouns in their discussions of abuse. Both emphasize that identified abusers are statistically more likely to be male, and both have worked extensively with men who are abusers or with women who have been abused. Emotional and verbal abuse, however, are not statistically tracked (to my knowledge), and I believe it is important to emphasize that the distinctions discussed here are not necessarily gendered.

> Whereas nonborderline persons can maintain their own self-integrity, the borderline individual requires another person to sustain this process. Thus the loss of the other carries a risk of feeling a loss of self . . . [which is] experienced as a profound terror with no distinct origin. The borderline person converts this into abuse through (1) the belief that the intimate partner should be able to ameliorate the bad feelings and (2) conversion of the terror into rage. (Dutton, 1998, p. 60)

The hidden nature of the need is also an important element: the abuser's dependency is "masked" according to Dutton. Abusers are unable to realize their dependency, much less act in such ways as to affirm it, or confirm it. They must explain their actions in other ways, and the explanation must lie in the failure of whichever "other" is easiest to blame. The fear of separation and loss mixed with the high degree of dependency and need for reassurance results in "strong ambivalent feelings such as love, anger, and guilt" toward those upon whom there is such dependence (Dutton, 1998, p. 63).

Within this context, communication behaviors that are exotically confusing become logical. The abuser needs attachment, but fears attachment, needs to enact behaviors that will maintain the relationship (abusers needs the other for their sense of self), while at the same time enacting those behaviors that we would routinely identify as alienating behaviors—those that will destroy a relationship (and which ultimately often do). The cyclical nature of abuse fits. Furthermore, the communication system is rife with multiple contradictory messages, and paradoxical constructions.

> Borderlines blame their partners when things go wrong in intimate relationships. And things are always going wrong, because they set impossible standards and double-binds for others. As their tension mounts, the need for perfect control in an imperfect world generates inevitable failure. . . . This personality profile creates an environment in which relationship conflict and abuse are inevitable. (Dutton, 1995, p. 146)

When there truly are mutually exclusive demands, enforced by an inability to leave the field, one is facing a paradox. It is not just a matter of domination. It is domination and control at the same time as messages of need and dependence. It is messages that derogate and disconfirm, while at the same time communicating that only you have the wherewithal to fulfill a desperate need *and* that you are a failure because you have failed to fulfill that need. A system of meaning that is paradoxical is by definition non-sense. Yet, for those who are invested, committed, and maybe even understand the pain with which their partner struggles, it is important to try to be the "caretaker" of the relationship. It is important to try to make the relationship work. It only makes sense to use the maintenance behaviors that have been found in many studies to be functional in helping develop a satisfying, equitable, and mutually beneficial relationship. After all, these are the behaviors that are connected to being a competent communicator.

Our approaches to relational maintenance tend to assume a model of relationship based upon mutuality and co-creation. Within the context of an emotionally and psychologically abusive relationship, however, which is based upon domination and control, these very behaviors nurture the sickness.

Evans emphasizes that often attempts to "improve communication" lead to more difficulties (p. 56). *Affinity seeking behaviors* (to use our jargon) such as honesty, sensitivity, and disclosures function to fuel the system:

> *The more the partner shares* her hopes and fears with the abuser, hoping for acceptance and intimacy, the more the abuser views her openness as weakness; the more superior he feels . . . the more Power Over he feels.
> *The more the partner shares* her interests and goals, the more the abuser introduces a situation or judgment which throws her off balance, diverts her from the, and reestablishes his control.
> *The more the partner brings up* topics and attempts to engage the abuser in conversation, the more the abuser withholds. . .
> *The more the partner lets go of* her hope for acceptance and intimacy with the abuser . . . the more angry and hostile the abuser becomes. (p. 56, emphasis in original)

Standard maintenance behaviors, when enacted in an abusive system, reinforce the system and the logic of the system. The abuser only understands dominance and control. From this perspective (*Reality I*), maintenance behaviors do not mean support for other. They become adversarial. *Positivity* affirms the system, is likely to be taken as manipulative ("What are you trying to get by me?"). *Reassurance* will not reassure, because the abuser cannot *be* reassured, and so will affirm the failure of the partner *to* reassure ("you should have made me feel better but you did not"). *Accommodation* affirms the system—the control is accepted and treated as normal. *High levels of sacrifice* will likewise affirm the system ("it is right and normal that such sacrifice would be made"). No reciprocity will be engaged because the abuser does not perceive that a sacrifice has been made—the sacrificial behavior is reinterpreted as a necessary attempt to make up for failure and deficiency. Strong *expressions of commitment* affirm the system. There is no reason for the abuser to change. *Shared tasks* will inevitably result in blame, if not for insufficient expenditure of effort, for incompetence at doing the task (the bar will always be raised; no task can ever be done correctly because the standard always changes). This, in turn, becomes fodder for more criticism. An expectation that tasks will be shared will be taken as an assertion of dominance and as a threat to dominance.

As Evans puts it,

> The great tragedy in a verbally abusive relationship is that the partner's efforts to bring reconciliation, mutual understanding and intimacy are rejected out of hand by the abuser because to him they are adversarial.

> This is so because, if he isn't feeling Power Over his partner, he is feeling that she must be trying to overpower him. *There is no mutuality in his reality.* (p. 119, emphasis added)

Trying to function from the assumption of mutuality when in a system based on domination cannot work if one remains in the system. Within the system, any attempts to enact a mutual problem-solving approach will be turned into evidence of an attempt to dominate, because the other has no other interpretive frame operating. Every attempt to problem-solve, to be empathetic to those identified as antagonists (whether it be oneself, or one's children, or any other identified antagonist), or build self-esteem of the identified antagonists (such as one would want to do for one's children, in a system based upon mutuality and co-creation) becomes evidence of the abuser "losing."

There is no way to be functional, then, if one stays in the system, because every thing that does not affirm the abuser's dominance is seen as an attempt to dominate or as an affirmation of the abuser's definition of the system. Furthermore, any attempt to change the system is turned into an affirmation of the system because it is interpreted as an attempt to dominate. Add the further layer of needing an "other" to always be inadequate (so the comparison will always come out affirming the abuser's superiority, because that's the only way to affirm self), and one *cannot* stay in the system and retain a positive sense of self.

One characteristic of abusive systems is the individual being abused blames self. The abuser uses this; it is a requisite part of the abusive system. The abuser derogates other, and consistently reframes events to identify the recipient of abuse as the cause of any unhappiness, discord, or anger. Self-blame, however, is not just because of messages from the abuser. It is also grounded in the fact that everything one tries in attempts to make the relationship work are the very things one *needs* to be doing in a healthy relationship. All those behaviors that are supposed to be done by people who are functioning in a competent manner. Maintenance behaviors. Responses to dialectics to keep those oppositional forces from harming the relationship. The give-and-take. The decision to overlook slights. The decision to "choose your battles" and let go of the little things because they don't really matter. The patience to weather the stressful times, because we all have periods when we get stressed out and somewhat narcissistic. And our partner does these things for us (ideally)—we expect reciprocation. That's the way it is supposed to work. All these things are things we do to maintain relationships. In healthy relationships we do these things for each other because none of us is perfect. But in abusive relationships, the abuser exploits these. *The very behaviors that are functional in a healthy relationship are dysfunctional in an abusive relationship.*

So the self-blame is partially tied up in this: if the recipient of abuse knows these behaviors should be functional, and they aren't, then she or he must be doing them wrong. Logic of the system of meaning functioning dictates it: "The abuser is right. I am wrong, incompetent, bad." This is reinforced by continually being told, subtly and not so subtly, that you are surely to blame.

If you are an individual embedded within such as system, you cannot make sense of this. You cannot make sense of a paradox. You cannot have an impact upon aversive events that are uncontrollable. The behaviors we teach assume that the events that occur in a relationship are controllable. We respond to controllable events in fairly predictable ways: through assertiveness, by setting out to achieve goals, by problem-solving, by aggression (Dutton, 1998, p. 40). Events in abuse, however, are not controllable. Try as we might, the internal struggle of the other is not within our control, despite being told over and over that it is—and because it is (which is an illusion) our attempts to maintain the relationship just provide further evidence of our inadequacy.

Conclusion

The characteristics of verbal and emotional abuse are evident throughout our culture. Surely there are many people who can and want to learn patterns of communication that are different from an abusive communication style they may have learned. Surely there are those who are willing to work to make a relationship better. Nevertheless, there are individuals who use highly destructive communication patterns that are intractable, that destroy self-esteem, and that create meaning systems that are tightly woven webs of logic that defy change. We need to recognize that these kinds of systems exist. We need to address how these systems work, learn more about their power, and reconsider our assumptions about how to act when confronted with a troubled relationship.

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